

Participatory governance to enable neighbourhood agency and resilience

Cities Institute Agenda Setting
February 2024



Background

There are significant challenges to building a city-wide participation in city planning including the siloed and disparate efforts encouraged by short-term project-specific funding, as well as the disconnection between initiatives across regions. Participatory forms of city planning that foster a culture of citizen agency outside of political cycles hold much promise in addressing the prevailing trust deficit in government¹.

This requires a shift away from the **prevailing model of discrete community consultation** for council strategic planning, towards one in which **deliberative forums including citizens' assemblies and participatory budgeting** are charged with meaningfully directing the development of neighbourhood infrastructure and services, as well as overarching strategic goals.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how to enable an active citizenry and participatory governance at the scale of local government. With regards to participatory governance and measuring progress, while reflecting on the experiences of Regen Sydney, this paper explores:

1. Partnerships at the local scale
2. The value of harnessing the Sydney Doughnut
3. Methods to measure progress holistically, and
4. Ways to work across LGAs (Local Government Areas).

1 Domazet et al., 2013)

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Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Bidjigal, the Traditional Custodians of the land on which the Cities Institute is located, and pay our respects to Elders, past and present.



Participatory Governance

Introduction

This paper looks at how participatory governance can help to enable wellbeing and resilience - both within neighbourhoods and across them - in Greater Sydney. Cultures of citizen participation and the mechanisms to support meaningful input into local and state government have the potential to enable city planning to better meet the needs of communities. There is a growing appetite for such measures, as evidenced by findings in the Sydney 2050 Citizens' Jury concepts report.

In the following sections, we outline approaches to partnership building and strategy development that could help to facilitate these outcomes. Participatory forms of city planning that foster a culture of citizen agency outside of political cycles hold much promise in addressing the prevailing trust deficit in government¹.

How might trust and agency be fostered in communities through participatory governance?

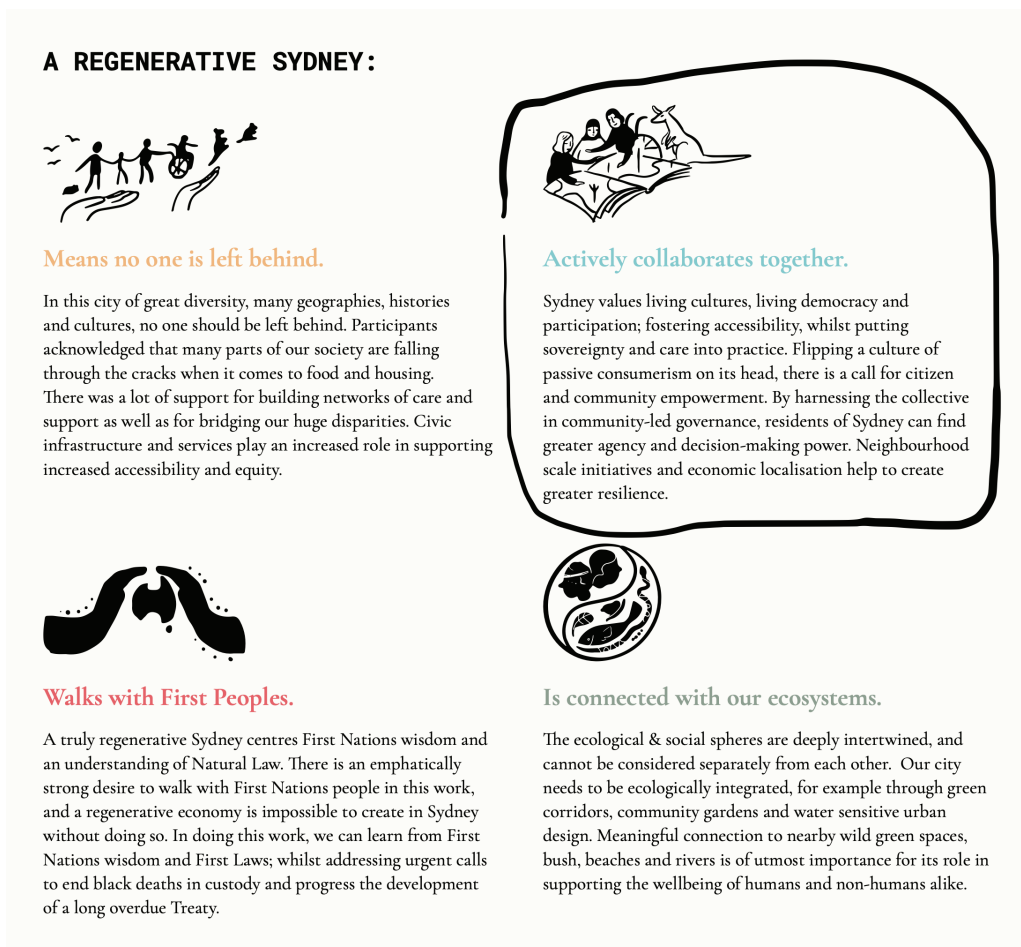


Figure 1. Vision statements formed from Regen Sydney community workshops, held late 2022

1 Domazet et al., 2013

Research into these dynamics align with two concurrent streams of work at Regen Sydney – Neighbourhood Activations and the Living Lab – together they seek to harness the Sydney Doughnut (further detailed later) and reveal how best to measure progress using indicators for socio-ecological wellbeing at the local scale. In this paper we seek to ask the right questions with regards to participatory governance and measuring progress, rather than to have all the answers for the long-term wicked problems facing city planning. In particular, the following sections explore:

1. Partnerships at the local scale
2. The value of harnessing the Sydney Doughnut
3. Methods to measure progress holistically, and
4. Ways to work across LGAs.

Partnerships at the local scale

A relational foundation

Working to enable an active citizenry and participatory governance at the scale of local government requires a shift away from the **prevailing model of discrete community consultation** for council strategic planning, towards one in which **deliberative forums including citizens' assemblies and participatory budgeting** are charged with meaningfully directing the development of neighbourhood infrastructure and services, as well as overarching strategic goals (Aulich, 2009).

When considering the nature of self-determination in local-scale decision-making, it is apparent that the collaborators themselves must be enabled to co-create participatory governance initiatives from the early stages of inception. A relational approach, (rather than a transactional one) seeks to build social infrastructure - partnerships based on trust and agency - whereby key collaborators can help to guide the creation of a 'Neighbourhood Working Group'².

Who needs to be involved in guiding participatory governance at the local scale?

Anchor institutions are central to building lasting participatory governance. These are large, stable organisations deeply rooted in their communities, such as universities, hospitals, and major corporations. Anchor institutions often have a long-term presence and significant resources, making them well-suited to drive systemic change. They are also characterised by having established relationships with local communities, meaning that they can use their connections to ensure that a wide range of voices and perspectives are included in participatory governance forums. These embedded institutions often also have influence at the local, state, and even federal levels, so are able to advocate for policies and participatory processes in a sustained manner that is not subject to short-term political changes. Anchor institutions have been found to be key strategic actors in community wealth-building approaches which are of interest to potential partners such as the City of Sydney (City of Sydney, 2021).

² See this article on '[Collective Action and Ownership](#)' by the Griffith Centre for Systems Innovation for a deeper dive into building relational capacity for wellbeing outcomes.

How might a 'Neighbourhood Working Group' be formed for sustained engagement?

Typologies of partnerships

Creating a culture of participatory citizenship at the local council scale and developing deliberative governance processes can benefit from collaboration with the following diverse sets of stakeholders:

- > Citizen democracy experts
- > Community advocacy groups
- > Local businesses
- > Council representatives (across community engagement, environmental planning, economic development and social services etc.)
- > NGOs focused on civic engagement
- > Schools and universities
- > Philanthropic foundations

When early in the formation of partnerships, an exploration of existing regenerative initiatives in the neighbourhood can help to draw in key players, as well as to build upon what's already there, without 'reinventing the wheel'. This kind of background research would help to identify key collaborators in the given context, including those that fall into the above categories. Specific contexts would likely surface particular clusters from the above list of potential partners.

What types of collaborative forums would help to grow a participatory culture?

Cultures of active citizenship must be **underpinned by trust and agency** amongst neighbourhood residents. Successful partnerships amongst key stakeholders to enable participatory governance require **transparency, inclusivity, and ongoing dialogue** amongst all collaborators. The forums that facilitate the development of such relationships and practices cannot be conducted as isolated interventions, but rather woven together to meaningfully develop the participatory culture and relational ethos of the community. In this regard, the **value of dedicated convenors cannot be overstated**, especially as they embody the above principles, hold stakeholder tensions and guide participants to navigate complex systemic issues.

Various instances of collaborative forums could help to nurture the development of a participatory culture at the local scale, ranging from informal gatherings to more formal decision-making sessions. In facilitating activities such as those below, it is important to strike a balance between a sense of creative fun, and systemic complexity:

- > Public presentations and installations
- > Mapping exercises (stakeholder, current state, future state)
- > Community dinners
- > Readings, show and tell
- > Creative visioning and co-design workshops
- > Yarning circles, debates and deliberative discussions
- > Citizens' assemblies with expert guests
- > Town hall meetings, focus groups, and online forums
- > Walkshops, roaming surveys and field visits



Figure 2. A walkshop held by Regen Sydney in Manly on Global Donut Day 2023

Harnessing the Sydney Doughnut

It is worth considering collaborative frameworks that might best foster participatory forms of city planning that acutely and systemically meet the needs of the communities of Sydney. The scope of participatory city planning is vast, yet often misses the potential to draw together strategies and initiatives in a holistic manner.

Wellbeing economics and regenerative economics offer approaches that address this issue and go some way to help planners and citizens alike to consider social and ecological drivers in their full interconnectedness. Such approaches acknowledge that many overlapping solutions can tend to be compartmentalised through prevailing top-down and departmental forms of governance.

How might participatory city planning meaningfully engage with social and ecological wellbeing?

The Doughnut Economics model is a leading regenerative economics framework, and “provides a broadly accessible tool to visualise the context of eco-social policies as integrated policies... [supporting] new patterns of production, consumption and investment, by prioritising collective investment and consumption over private commodities, conceptualising wellbeing improvements away from consumer behaviour and ensuring a radically fairer distribution of power and resources” (Domazet et al., 2023, p. 3).

Characterising the model is an inner circle of social foundations, and an outer ring of ecological thresholds, by which stakeholders can guide and measure strategic planning at various scales of jurisdiction. By applying the Doughnut Economics framework to participatory governance at the local and city scales, we can address issues of sustainability, inclusivity, and citizen participation in an integrated fashion, ultimately fostering greater wellbeing for both the community and ecologies of the area.



Figure 3. The Sydney Doughnut - co-created by the Regen Sydney network

The beauty of the Doughnut Economics model is in its simplicity, accessibility and adaptability with which people can apply various aspects of social and ecological inquiry to their specific context - for ongoing collaboration around identified cross-sectoral challenges (Turner & Wills, 2022). In the spirit of place-based engagement, the Sydney Doughnut shown below was developed by Regen Sydney in concert with its network, as an initial attempt to localise the original Doughnut Economics framework to the Greater Sydney context.

The Sydney Doughnut was created with additional social dimensions in the inner ring - 'access to nature', 'arts and culture', 'digital equity', as well as reframing all the ecological dimensions to be suitable for engagement at the city (rather than global) scale. Guided by an ethos of Caring for Country, and visual embodiment of what makes Sydney thrive in its unique way, this framework can act as a guiding compass with which to convene bold collaborative action.

How might the Sydney Doughnut help to grow a culture of participatory governance?

The Sydney Doughnut is well placed to act as a starting point for conversations at the street level between neighbourhood residents and stakeholders about the wellbeing of their shared community, as well as about social and ecological impacts. Acting as a conversational leveller, the framework can help to open up conversations between the average (economics-illiterate) citizen and other more well-versed professionals. Working with the Sydney Doughnut can be valuable in:

- > Identifying and articulating the areas of social and ecological concern most relevant to the local community, and the ways they might be linked.

- > Collaboratively sharing knowledge about the significance of prioritising ecological and social wellbeing in an integrated manner, including by considering non-human perspectives in strategic planning (Beatley & Bekoff, 2013).
- > Evaluating local council community strategies and environmental action plans through its holistic framework, in order to identify crucial gaps and opportunities.
- > Conducting participatory budgeting to prioritise spending and resource allocation to projects that enhance social equity, reduce environmental impact, and promote wellbeing.
- > Strengthening diverse and resilient local economies to prioritise job creation, local entrepreneurship, and sustainable industries, reducing reliance on resource-intensive activities.
- > Promoting local and sustainable food production to reduce the ecological footprint and enhance food security.
- > Creating incentives for businesses and individuals to adopt sustainable practices and technologies, including through tax incentives, grants, and recognition programs.

There are numerous emerging examples of the Doughnut framework being leveraged for neighbourhood activation, city planning and participatory governance - many of which draw from the Doughnut Economics Action Lab (DEAL) [Doughnut Unrolled: Community Portrait of Place](#) methodology. Birmingham is one stand out example, where the organisation Civic Square has conducted an extensive collaborative process to develop a [Neighbourhood Doughnut workbook](#) and hold a [Regenerative Neighbourhoods Festival](#). The images below (Figure 1) give a taste of the participatory culture that Civic Square has fostered.



Figure 4. Participatory activations by [Civic Square](#) during the Regenerative Neighbourhoods Festival in Birmingham, 2022

Inherent to the Community Portrait of Place are four lenses that prompt participants to not only explore local opportunities and challenges but to also consider the social and ecological impacts that might be experienced globally. These four lenses and their detailed prompts, together have the effect of encouraging a systemically integrated form of participatory planning, particularly in foregrounding suitable indicators for progress.

Measuring progress holistically

Earlier this year, the Federal Government released Australia's first wellbeing framework called 'Measuring What Matters', helping to strengthen momentum towards using more holistic frameworks to guide and evaluate our economies. This is a valiant first effort at understanding and articulating what matters to Australians with regards to our national economy, and draws from community consultations along with findings from other national and international wellbeing frameworks. Similarly, the 'City Resilience Index' created by Arup aims to understand and measure city resilience, and details a range of metrics to better guide holistic city planning.

The indicators in this framework are more suitable to the city-scale, albeit lack some aspects specific to the Australian context when compared to the Measuring What Matter framework.

While both these wellbeing frameworks offer a big step away from the dominant paradigm of GDP (Gross Domestic Product) and endless economic growth in their articulation of metrics for social wellbeing, they still fall woefully short in thoroughly surfacing indicators for ecological health in line with the globally recognised planetary boundaries. Although the Doughnut Economics framework is by no means perfect, it can more successfully support a holistic approach to measuring wellbeing.

How might city and council planning be best guided by a holistic set of indicators?

There is most definitely value in measuring progress at the national level, however with the geographic and demographic diversity of a city such as Sydney, local and city scale indicators become highly valuable to be able to identify and respond to context-specific needs that might otherwise slip through the cracks. Defining, measuring and evaluating metrics at the neighbourhood and city levels will not only inform Local Council strategies, but with the help of a networked platform can also advise on the city-wide policies of the State Government.

Being able to measure - both qualitatively and quantitatively - Sydney's progress in moving into a safe and just space will help our communities better identify areas for action - where we are succeeding and where we are falling short. The development of integrated social and ecological indicators can help to hold governments accountable to the communities of Sydney, harnessing the Doughnut as a compass for progress, and helping to address possible gaps in council's strategic plans to achieve more holistic outcomes for their place and communities.

Some considerations to make in developing a holistic measurement framework³

- > Whilst some indicators might already exist, other relevant metrics might need to be established first, before data may be collected. This data can be collected through surveys, research, and collaboration with local institutions and universities.
- > Maintaining transparency in data collected through regularly reporting on progress - including through a living dashboard, as seen in Regen Melbourne's City Portrait.
- > Create feedback mechanisms to continuously assess and adjust policies and initiatives based on the evolving needs and aspirations of the community. This should include avenues for citizens to hold governments accountable.

³ See this article on 'Diversifying Evidence and Value' by the Griffith Centre for Systems Innovation that explores a model with which to develop and use indicators that prioritise social and ecological wellbeing outcomes.

How can story and data be woven together to paint a rich, nuanced and evidence-based picture?

There is huge potential here for city planning metrics to be developed in such a way that they incorporate the nuance of lived experience. This could mean metrics that not only cut across social and ecological factors with their quantifiable measurement, but also weave together the stories of qualitative experiences that can help to contextualise the data and bring the indicators to life. The DEAL Doughnut Unrolled: Data Portrait of Place methodology is a valuable resource for these undertakings.



Figure 5. A snapshot of the Birmingham Neighbourhood Doughnut, highlighted with areas of overshoot and shortfall

Working across LGAs

Case study: Participatory Melbourne

There are some valuable insights that can be drawn from the Participatory Melbourne initiative which is being conducted in collaboration between Regen Melbourne, Coalition of Everyone, Menzies Foundation and the Australian Leadership Index at Swinburne University. These organisations have come together as ‘anchor partners’, working across Greater Melbourne to foster the development of trust, agency and active participation for collective decision-making.

Participatory Melbourne conducts research and cross-sector dialogue with a view to nurture systemic shifts that enable participatory cultures to thrive. Their first phase of work commenced in February 2023 has so far included (1) community activations, (2) foundational research, and (3) a design forum, which have together helped to garner the interest of relevant stakeholders, create a vision for a participatory ecosystem, and formulate subsequent areas of work.

Each of the anchor partners brings a unique contribution and approach to the initiative, including: convening the ecosystem of stakeholders, enabling the co-creation of new knowledge through research, orchestration of deliberative processes, and vision-led philanthropic funding. The work conducted in this phase has been convened beyond professional silos, and has taken place across the LGAs and neighbourhoods of Melbourne, drawing upon Regen Melbourne’s network and the catalysing force of the Melbourne Doughnut.



Figure 6. Add figure caption here

There is much to learn from Participatory Melbourne for the Sydney context, especially with regards to building upon the momentum of the Sydney Doughnut in fostering participatory activations across LGAs. A coalition of ‘anchor partners’ could similarly help to convene collaborators (professionals and ordinary citizens) from numerous council areas to enable a city-wide movement for participatory governance.

How might collaborators from across Sydney’s LGAs convene to grow a city-wide movement for participatory governance?

Building a city-wide participatory platform

Challenges to building a city-wide participatory movement include the siloed and disparate efforts encouraged by short-term project-specific funding, as well as the disconnection between initiatives across regions. A platform for participatory governance that is founded upon a support network of aligned organisations can help to circumvent these issues. A city-wide participatory platform can help to democratise funding allocation, set a long-term agenda based upon the opportunities and goals of collaborating neighbourhoods, as well as connecting the ecosystem of practitioners across Greater Sydney.

The Participatory City Foundation, based out of London, UK, describe such a model in their report ‘[The Illustrated Guide to Participatory City](#)’. Their publication details the benefits of creating a city-wide platform, which they call the Participatory City Platform. Along with fostering a shift towards participatory culture, a platform model can provide greater coherence in funding projects - as shown in their diagram below.

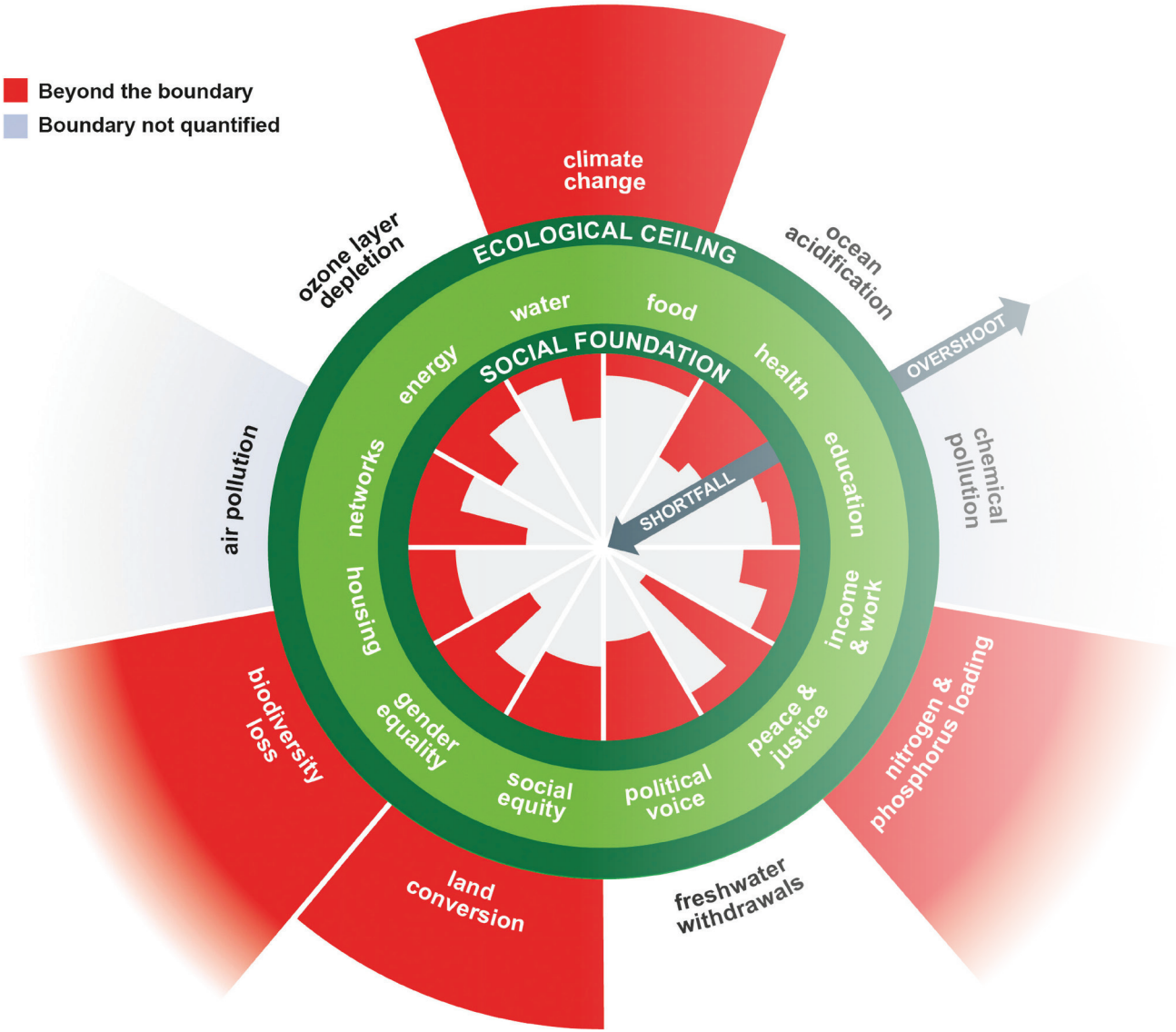


Figure 7. Funding through the Participatory City Platform (Britton & Anderson, 2016, p. 52)

How might learnings be shared across scales and the growth of a participatory governance movement be further catalysed?

True participatory governance is founded on well designed shared finance that links resources to shared ownership of decision-making power. A cross-council initial collaboration would be well placed to explore the conditions that would support a city-wide movement for participatory governance that goes beyond consultation or even participation, to shared ownership and decision-making on either or both of (1) the procedural and financial infrastructure for cross-council collaboration and (2) a pilot project within that partnership.

The creative prototypes and strategic findings for a city-wide participatory platform, could be shared via a playbook - whether developed within the boundaries of an LGA or through a cross-council collaboration. This could help to extend strategic partnerships across additional neighbourhoods and LGAs in Greater Sydney.



Briefing notes

Considerations

Participatory forms of city planning that foster a culture of citizen agency outside of political cycles hold much promise in addressing the prevailing trust deficit in government¹.

Working to enable an active citizenry and participatory governance at the scale of local government requires a shift away from the **prevailing model of discrete community consultation** for council strategic planning, towards one in which **deliberative forums including citizens' assemblies and participatory budgeting** are charged with meaningfully directing the development of neighbourhood infrastructure and services, as well as overarching strategic goals.

Anchor institutions are central to building lasting participatory governance as they often also have influence at the local, state, and even federal levels, so are able to advocate for policies and participatory processes in a sustained manner that is not subject to short-term political changes.

Cultures of active citizenship must be **underpinned by trust and agency** amongst neighbourhood residents.

Various instances of collaborative forums could help to nurture the development of a participatory culture at the local scale, ranging from informal gatherings to more formal decision-making sessions.

The scope of participatory city planning is vast, yet often misses the potential to draw together strategies and initiatives in a holistic manner.

The Doughnut Economics model is a leading regenerative economics framework, and provides a broadly accessible tool to visualise the context of eco-social policies as integrated policies.

The Sydney Doughnut is well placed to act as a starting point for conversations at the street level between neighbourhood residents and stakeholders about the wellbeing of their shared community, as well as about social and ecological impacts. Acting as a conversational leveller, the framework can help to open up conversations between the average (economics-illiterate) citizen and other more well-versed professionals.

Although the Doughnut Economics framework is by no means perfect, it can successfully support a holistic approach to measuring wellbeing.

Being able to measure - both **qualitatively and quantitatively** - Sydney's progress in moving into a safe and just space will help our communities better identify areas for action - where we are succeeding and where we are falling short.

Challenges to building a city-wide participatory movement include the siloed and disparate efforts encouraged by short-term project-specific funding, as well as the disconnection between initiatives across regions. A city-wide platform for participatory governance that is founded upon a support network of aligned organisations can help to circumvent these issues.

1 Domazet et al., 2013

Recommendations

Replace the prevailing model of discrete community consultation for council strategic planning with deliberative forums including citizens' assemblies and participatory budgeting. These may take the form of informal gatherings to more formal decision-making sessions.

Utilise 'anchor institutions to facilitate meaningful participation, underpinned by trust, embedding in the community.

Utilise the Doughnut Economics model to visualise the context of eco-social policies as integrated policies. Acting as a conversational leveller, the framework can help to open up conversations between the average (economics-illiterate) citizen and other more well-versed professionals.

Conclusion

What other possibilities might a platform for participatory governance reveal?

The development of a platform for participatory governance holds great potential to empower citizens and harness civic infrastructure in the commons to address social and ecological inequities. In doing so, such a platform could act as a crucible through which new forms of value, interdependence and infrastructuring become possible through experimentation. [Dark Matter Labs](#) explores these concepts in their report 'Radicle Civics: Building 21st Century Civic Infrastructures'. They ask - 'what is the potential for developing system-shifting civic infrastructures that deeply embed participatory practices beyond the limits of the outdated compartmentalisation of state, private and third sector?'

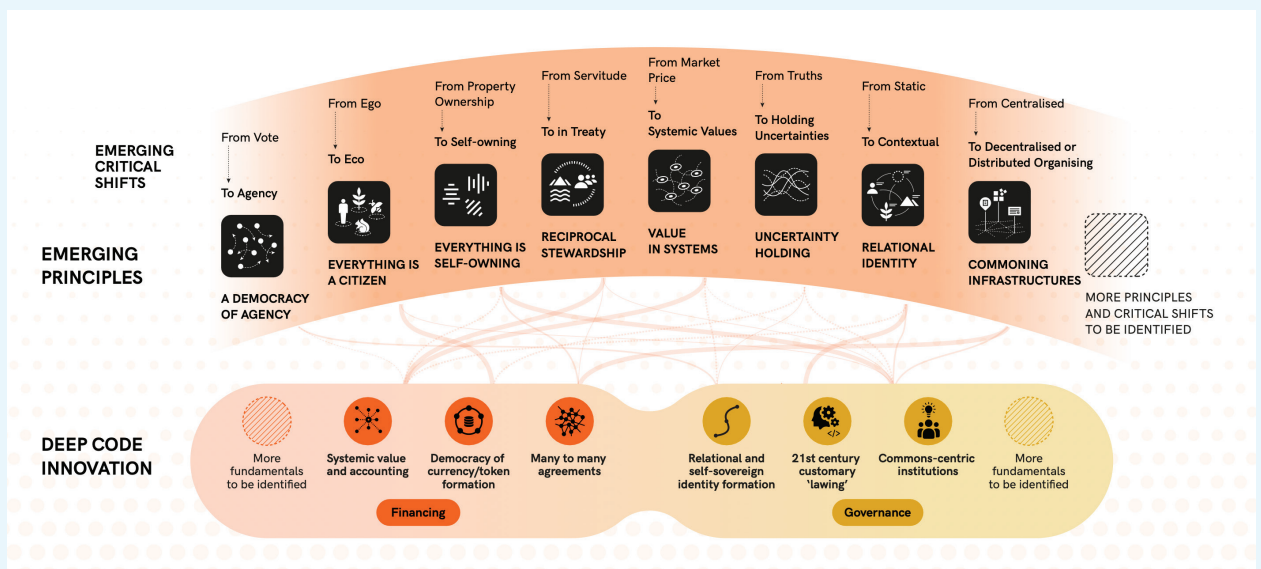


Figure 8. Foundations for commons-centric civic infrastructures (Chang & Johar, 2021, p. 35)

Rather than conceptualising of infrastructures as fixed, centralised entities, there is a call to action to see 'infrastructuring' as a participatory, dynamic and decentralised process.

How might a city-wide participatory governance platform be funded?

Two opportunities for funding and collaboration that could catalyse a city-wide participatory governance platform in Sydney include:

- > [Nexus Centre](#) (National Centre for Place-Based Collaboration) - "The Nexus Centre is envisaged to be an independent, non-government entity to support more inclusive and effective place-based partnerships between communities, governments, the non-government sector, business, and investors. It will recognise that place-based approaches differ and the 'right' approach reflects the needs and local arrangements that work best for that community."
- > [Precinct Support Scheme](#) (NSW Government) - "The Precinct Support Scheme (PSS) is a \$85 million local infrastructure grants program which aims to support urban renewal and sustainable growth in planned precincts by providing funding for public and open space projects."

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Collaborate with us

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In the spirit of reconciliation, the UNSW Cities Institute acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their connections to land, waters and community. This publication was prepared by the UNSW Cities Institute. February 2024.

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